

## READERS GUIDE

### A Conversation with Nancy Thayer

Random House Reader's Circle: What made you write this story?

Nancy Thayer: The ideas for my books all come from deep within my heart and my life. In many ways, *Beachcombers* is about dealing with loss—of a parent, or like Marina, of a husband and best friend, or of an important job, income, and fiancé. We all face loss. Sometimes loss makes you dig deep into yourself to find what you never realized was there.

My mother was ninety-one and failing when I started writing *Beachcombers*. My sister, Martha, a nurse, visited my mother in her nursing home every day. When she was younger, my mother had worked for the development department of a hospital; she was capable and logical. She loved music and reading above all things. One time when I was a teenager, she was driving a car and I was sitting next to her, in the front seat. She had the radio on, playing classical music, when suddenly, Mother said, with joy, "Nancy, look at those birds!" She pointed to the sky. "It looks like they're flying in time to the music!" Then she drove the car into a tree. (We weren't hurt.) In some ways, my character Danielle is like how my mother was, loving, but often forgetting us because she's hearing other music.

My sister often called from the Kansas City nursing facility to talk with me here in Nantucket. Mother, Martha, and I discussed so many memories. Later, while driving away from the nursing home, my sister would call and we'd talk about other memories of our mother. I knew we would be losing her soon. I began to wonder what it must be like to lose your mother when you are still very young, and that was the germ of *Beachcombers*.

RHRC: In *Beachcombers*, you delve into four very different female perspectives. Did you find any one woman harder to write than the others?

NT: Lily was the hardest character for me to write, not because she wasn't like me, but because she was so very much like I was when I was in my twenties. True, I was the oldest of three children, so I did a lot of nurturing and caretaking like Abbie. I'd once lived in Kansas City, been divorced, and started my life over on Nantucket like Marina. I was practical, hardworking, and history-loving like Emma.

But when I was young, I was so Lily. I desperately wanted to leave Wichita, Kansas, where I grew up. I wanted to live in Paris or New York City. My best friend and I were going to run away, wear black turtlenecks, recite our poetry in coffee houses, and have mad affairs with dangerous men. If I had met Eartha when I was Lily's age, I would have been her servant in a flash. When I look back at myself in my late teens and early twenties, I see someone who didn't care a fig for keeping house or being on time and responsible. I wanted glamour, bright lights, sexy clothes, martinis! (Kansas was a dry state; I'd never had a martini.)

Knowing my past, when I wrote *Beachcombers*, it was hard for me to give Lily a break,

because she was so much like I had been: kind of an idiot. Or are we all idiots at twenty?

RHRC: Do you begin writing with an idea of your characters in mind or do you allow them to evolve as the story progresses?

NT: I always start with characters in mind, and also a kind of theme, like loss, or as in *Summer House*, generations of family, or how friendships change over time. The characters definitely evolve as I write. They become more fully formed, more definitely themselves. In fact, they take over. Sometimes I have to stop typing and say aloud to my empty study, "I really can't allow you to say that in print!" I am incapable of sitting and plotting in advance. I either type, or I go for a walk, and things shift in my brain. I want to say, "Well, why didn't you tell me this in the first place!" Or I phone my daughter, Samantha Wilde, also a published novelist, and ask something like, "Should Joe marry Helen?" Sam will say, "Duh, no, Mom, he's going to marry Sarah." And I'll say, "Oh! I had no idea," but I know instantly she's right, and I hang up the phone and go back to work.

Writing is a mystery, and when it works well, a delight. When it doesn't work well, it goes into the shredder.

RHRC: Reading your novels always makes me want to visit Nantucket. Does the beauty and nature of Nantucket inspire your creativity while writing?

NT: I usually take a walk every day when I'm writing, often an adventure in the winter, but I love the ocean in the winter. It's so dramatic! The white surf pounds. The air sparkles. On Great Point, I walk near harbor seals wallowing in the sand, oinking like pigs from eating so many fish. Once my husband and I saw a group of enormous grey seals with their gorilla bodies and black horse heads hanging out next to the shore like a bunch of adolescent gangsters. They were fascinated by us. We studied them. They studied us. They kind of flirted with us. I'm pretty sure they thought we were funny looking. Or maybe delicious looking. It was thrilling. And terrifying. We didn't go any closer. Even the sweet little harbor seals bite. So much of such incomprehensible difference so near to us every day—that shakes the doldrums out of me and stirs me up.

Also, the town of Nantucket is exquisitely beautiful, the houses mostly old and shingled, with small gardens hidden behind hedges or picket fences. Many of the houses are named, with signs called quarter boards above the door. On Fair Street sits *Fairy Tale*, *Fair Isle*, and *Fair Thee Well*. Door knockers are mermaids, or whale tails, or scallop shells. Many houses have "widows' walks" where women whose husbands were off at sea watched for approaching ships. Window boxes spill with flowers in most seasons. Walking around Main Street and over to India Street where our magnificent Greek Revival library stands and over to the Episcopal church with its Tiffany stained-glass window is always inspiring. And if I stop in at *Even Keel* for a mocha latte and one of their chocolate cakes, then I'm exhilarated.

I believe that sometimes you just have to go somewhere else. Perhaps you've had a tremendous loss and you're sad. Or you've worked very hard and you're exhausted. Or

everything is great, but still, something's missing and you can't figure it out. Nantucket is thirty miles out at sea. You have to fly or take a boat to get here. Here, you're surrounded by water. Here, no chains stores, no Dunkin Donuts or ToysUs, and if you rent a car, you can't go faster than 25 mph on the narrow roads. History is everywhere; you walk on the cobblestones brought over from England hundreds of years ago. Nature is everywhere. And it isn't only sweet. If you don't watch out, a gull will swoop down and steal your sandwich right off your picnic blanket.

I've seen people come here for a week and leave changed. I've met groups of women who reunite here from all over the country in the autumn to rent a cottage, walk in the sand or on the moors, eat lobster dripping with butter or fresh sweet scallops, and talk all day and much of the night. They go home recharged for the year. I know the nature and beauty of the island changes people. I've heard them talk about it.

RHRC: Why do you think the relationships between sisters are so complex and complicated?

NT: I think relationships between any two human beings are complex and complicated. But with sisters, you've got emotional memories of the intense past to color everything that happens in the present. Children get labeled, even unintentionally, not just by their parents, but by the children themselves. "The Smart One," "The Baby," "The Favorite," "The Shy One." When we grow up, those roles lurk in our unconscious, shadowing our present behavior.

For example, my sister, Martha, is now my best friend. She is nine years younger than I, so she is the baby of the family. I have brown hair and hazel eyes, while Martha is a blond with gorgeous blue eyes. She was always adored by everyone, no matter what she did. Once, for example, she ruined my lipsticks. I yelled at her. She cried. My mother always just went gooey over Martha. "Oh, when you cry, your eyes turn turquoise! Nancy how can you be mean to her?" Martha looked like my father, so of course she was the favorite. She didn't have to do chores. She had a canopy bed. Of course, I'm not saying she was spoiled. . . . Wait! Am I getting off track?

RHRC: I love the scene where Marina and Sheila go to Madaket Mall to find treasures. Have you ever found any surprising treasures in an unlikely place like Madaket Mall?

NT: Oh, yes. At the end of the summer, and this is true, many of the exceptionally wealthy women who vacation here for a month or two weeks have their maids bring their clothes to the dump because they wouldn't dream of wearing them next summer, which will be a different season. Many of the clothes still have price tags on them. I haven't gotten clothing there, but I have friends who have. What I do get, although I hesitate to share this information, is British mysteries and British novels. There's a book section in the Madaket Mall, and someone comes here in the summer and leaves brand-new British fiction behind. Bless them.

The thing to remember is that this is an island. The ferries and planes bring supplies over, but on this small island, it makes sense to recycle, and people did it here at the Madaket Mall before it became politically correct. Need a new door? New window frame? New dress? A mirror? Some pretty mismatched china for your rented summer

cottage? It's there. It may not fit perfectly, but it's free.

RHRC: Why did you choose that specific line from e. e. cummings's "Maggie and Milly and Molly and May"?

NT: This book begins with loss of all kinds. Sometimes we do lose ourselves right in the midst of a busy life. I think nature is a miraculous restorative. We can walk by the ocean, or hike up a mountain, or swim in a lake. We can weed our backyard garden. When we're out in nature, our minds drift away from the little gerbil-wheel revolving endlessly in our mind. We take deep breaths—of new air, fresh air, different air. We watch the sun sparkle on water. Nature gives us back to ourselves, refreshed. It is ourselves we find in the sea.

RHRC: Do you agree with Danielle's beliefs that the universe is always speaking to us?

NT: Yes. But it's not like a two-way conversation on a cell phone. The universe is not going to solve our problems. I think the universe sends us hints to pay attention, be alive, look around.

Here's an example: Yesterday my daughter, Sam, phoned in tears. She has three little children, she's breastfeeding her baby, and she had two blocked milk ducts. She was in terrible pain and developing a fever. Her husband works and couldn't come home to help. After her call, I was so worried, I went for a walk up and down the wharves, looking at the water, trying to decide what to do. Should I pack, take a ferry, drive three hours, and help her? Should I stay home and work? I was frantic. I kept thinking: two ducts! Two ducts! I turned the corner and there in the water were two ducks. It made me laugh out loud. I realized the problem was not terrible. When I got home, she phoned to say her husband had brought home antibiotics and she felt better. I think the universe sends us hints, clues, puns, and always amazing beauty to remind us where we are. Interpretation is up to us.

RHRC: Where did you get the idea for the Beachcombers Club?

NT: Perhaps deep in all our hearts lies a primitive soul who loves the idea of finding "treasure." Certainly in twenty-seven years, everyone I've ever walked with on the beach has suddenly bent down and picked up a rock or a shell, studied it, and tucked it into his/her pocket. If you go into Nantucket houses, you'll see shells on shelves, under glass, on windowsills, on the sides of the bathtubs. Out of zillions of pebbles and shells on the beach, everyone seems to discover something. "Now here is an interesting rock," they say. Everyone becomes a beachcomber on Nantucket. The idea of a club came from walking with my children on the beach when they were smaller and I needed to find a way to discard some of our finds. (Although I wasn't as peculiar a mother as Danielle was.)

RHRC: What are you working on at the moment?

NT: Heat Wave, which comes out in hardcover in summer, is about a young woman, Carley Winsted, who has two daughters and a wonderful life when suddenly she is

widowed. In addition, the lives of her two best friends become inextricably tangled, and Carley must choose between them. She discovers she doesn't, and perhaps can't, always do the "right" thing. It's the sort of lesson that's hard for some of us to learn, especially good-hearted Carley. I hope readers will enjoy Carley's company as much as I have.

#### Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Do brothers and sisters fight less and have more easygoing relationships than sisters? Why are the relationships between sisters so complicated?
2. Which of the four women did you most identify with?
3. Given Lily's desire to visit glamorous places and have fancy things, why is she the only sister who comes back home to Nantucket after college?
4. Was Marina running away from her problems by going to Nantucket, or did she need time by herself to heal?
5. Danielle battles her depression in front of her girls, while Sydney is very strict with Harry and is often away from her family. Are either of them intrinsically bad mothers, or are they trying the best they can with the situations they have?
6. If Emma and Marina did not get caught red-handed, would Emma's decision to remain discrete regarding her suspicions about the stolen light baskets seem more admirable, or should Emma have just gone straight to Spencer with her concerns?
7. Were Abbie, Emma, and Jim wrong to shelter and spoil Lily after Danielle's death?
8. If you were in Emma's shoes, would you encourage Abbie to continue her relationship with Howell, given what you know of Howell and Sydney's relationship?
9. Should a couple who is not in love with each other stay together for the sake of their child?